

## WHY DID RUSSIA INVADE UKRAINE? HISTORICAL INSIGHTS AND CONFLICT ANALYSIS

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### Abstract

*The Russian invasion of Ukraine erupted on February 24<sup>th</sup>, 2022, and has brought huge devastation to the Ukrainian people. In early 2014, the escalation of the Ukrainian crisis brought an end to the post-Cold-War status quo in Eastern Europe. Since, the region remained under crisis and is mainly over Russia's demands for an end to the NATO's eastward expansion. Russia's annexation of Crimea (a part of Ukraine) remained a major bone of contention between the two sides. Hence, Ukraine's inclination toward the western camp created insecurity for Russia as it would be no more an arduous task for the US to contain the communist country. Thereby, to break such an occurrence Russia invaded Ukraine. Later on, Russia affirms the withdrawal of its troops from Ukraine and guaranteed to restrain future attacks and aggressions only on the terms of the ceasefire talks. This paper mainly aims at providing an in-depth analysis of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and shed some light on the western response to the entire scenario.*

**Keywords:** Russia, Ukraine, Invasion, Crisis, NATO, Western Response

### Introduction

Russian escalation of the war in Ukraine has set up the biggest threat to peace and security in Europe in the post-Cold War period. Hence, it is worth mentioning that the war escalation occurred due to the long list of grievances of Russia against Ukraine. On February 21<sup>st</sup>, 2022, Vladimir Putin the Russian President presented his speech as a

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justification for the special military operation against Ukraine. The grievances included Ukraine's tilt towards European Union (EU) and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), which itself possesses expansionist policies and shape the post-Cold-War period in Europe. Thus tracing back the history of the Ukrainian crisis, the tensions got started at its inception in 1991. Ever since then Ukraine was influenced by the Russian oligarchs, politicians, and business community as the country was one of the strongest Russian satellite states. Such influence was not acceptable to the Ukrainian people and thus "Orange Revolution" in 2004-2005 took place in the capital city of Ukraine, Kyiv, which opposed the Russian politicians' that influenced Ukraine which is now a constitutionally independent state since the Soviet disintegration in 1991. Apart from opposing Russia's dominancy over Ukraine the revolution also indicated the institutionalization of democracy (Gierczak, 2020).

Nevertheless, Ukrainian society is religiously, ethnically, and linguistically divided into some regions i.e. the province of Luhansk and Donetsk and the Crimean peninsula that strongly identify to be the part of Russia. Therefore Russia's military operation over Crimea in 2014 initiated one of the biggest international conflicts between the two states and has been raised to its peak as of the involvement of external players such as; the EU, and the US that demonstrates the difficulty in resolving the crisis between both the sides. Whereas, Vladimir Putin's Neo-imperial foreign policy has also made this conflict challenging. In addition, the strategically crucial geo-political position of Ukraine needs a third party's involvement to get rid of the inhuman acts and deterioration of human rights on Ukraine's territory. Russia has always claimed Ukraine to be part of its motherland and has shown its keen interest in the Ukrainian territory ranging from diplomatic, economic, and military interests to put a stop to the US and NATO's expansionist policies around Europe (Achinulo & Alabo, 2022).

However, it has been noticed that Ukraine, the Russian Federation, and the West appeared to be locked in an emerging conflict on the world stage. Hence, the most commonly asked question is what are Putin's interests in Ukraine? To provide an answer to this question the analysis of Russia's role in the crisis will help conclude the answer. The scholarly analysis provides that Russia's desire to dominate

Ukraine is not only to be protected from western threats but also to regain its previous image of being a superpower of the world (Tsygankov, 2018). While examining Russia's and the west's past dialogues implicit that the root cause of the tensions between both sides is entwined by the divergent perceptions and conceptions of status over whether Russia has lost or gained its international position or identity. Russian motive has strongly been influenced by the extrinsic validation of its image as a global power. In addition, Russia is contending for enhanced international recognition as a great power while keeping intact its national identity. According to Tsygankov (2018), Russia's relations with NATO in the post-Cold-War period are distinguished by the historical association of the military alliance (NATO) as a threat that is now linked to the policies of encroachments by the western civilization on the borders of Russia. Hence, two scenarios emerged i.e. the 2014 Ukrainian crisis and the second the most recent break out of the Russian-Ukrainian war in 2022.

The analysis of the Ukrainian crisis discerns that the Russian invasion has caused seismic repercussions including; a refugee crisis, the shakeup of international ties between the major powers, and unprecedented sanctions against the Russian economy. Thus the Ukrainian crisis is referred to as a multi-dimensional disaster that will get worse enough in the foreseeable future. The outcomes will be disastrous for both sides. However, comprehending how the crisis materialized becomes paramount. It is undeniable to say that US allies bear responsibility for the entire scenario. The conclusion stresses that multiple factors contribute to the crisis. Moreover, the war escalation between Ukraine and Russia, and the Russian response, brought a major issue of concern for the US and its allies in particular (Anieri, 2019). Due to the war situation, several questions arise, thereby; the following part of the paper provides an in-depth discussion over the dispute.

### **The Tangled History of the Russian-Ukrainian Crisis**

Ukraine is situated in Eastern Europe and is the largest state in the continent after Russia. Both countries have been engaged in hostilities for a long period. Russia and Ukraine had been cornerstones of the

former Soviet Union Empire. After Russia, Ukraine was the most robust and densely populated republic of the USSR (Union of Soviet Socialist Republic) as well as a huge opponent of the United States. It was where the nuclear, agricultural, and defense sectors of the Union were based. Keeping in view Ukraine's importance, its independence in 1991 proved to be the final nail in the coffin of the mighty soviet realm. Since its emancipation, Ukraine has always struggled to become an independent nation and also endeavoured to become a close ally of Western organizations such as NATO and the EU (Masters, 2022).

However, to understand the rivalry, it is essential to go through the history of the truculent neighbours to unfold how the stage was set for today's warfare. Both Russia and Ukraine share a history that dates back to a thousand years when 'Kyiv' the present-day capital of Ukraine was the heart of the 1<sup>st</sup> Slavic State, Kyivan Rus, also known as the origin of both Ukraine and Russia. Vladimir I, a pagan prince of Novgorod and the grand prince of Kyiv, in the year 988 AD converted to the Orthodox Christian faith and underwent baptism in Chersoneses, Crimea. Referring to this, Russian President Vladimir Putin recently proclaimed that "Russians and Ukrainians are one people, a single whole". But during the past ten centuries, rival powers have frequently divided Ukraine. The 13th century saw the conquest of Kyivan Rus by eastern Mongol armies. In the sixteenth century, the Lithuanian and Polish troops assailed from the west. In the seventeenth century, the confrontation between the Russian Tsardom and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth brought the territories to the east of the Dnieper River that came under the control of Russian imperialism. Hence, the eastern region came to be known as the "Left Bank" Ukraine, while Poland dominated the territory to the west of the Dnieper, or the "Right Bank." The Russian Empire, later after more than a century in 1793, annexed western Ukraine. Consequently, in the following years, the Russification policy forced individuals to adopt the Russian Orthodox religion and forbade the use and study of the Ukrainian language (Conant, 2022). In the 20th century, Ukraine saw some of the worst catastrophes. Ukraine before being completely integrated into the Soviet Union in 1922, endured a bloody civil war following the 1917 communist revolution. Early in the 1930s, Joseph Stalin the Soviet leader staged a famine resulting in

the deaths of millions of Ukrainians to compel peasants to join collective farms. Stalin then sent in enormous numbers of Russians and other Soviet residents to help repopulate the east, many of whom had little or no knowledge about Ukrainians. These historical legacies left behind permanent fault lines. Therefore, the citizens in the eastern part of Ukraine were closely linked to Russia and have a history of supporting pro-Russian leaders. Moreover, unlike western Ukraine, their region has also been under Russian control for a prolonged period. Western Ukrainians, in contrast, tend to prefer leaders who are more pro-Western because their region spent centuries under the varying control of European nations like Poland and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. While sections of the west are more Catholic Ukrainian-speaking and the eastern population is typically more Orthodox and Russian-speaking. Ukraine gained its independence in 1991 with the dissolution of the Soviet Union. But bringing the nation together proved to be challenging.

According to the former ambassador to Ukraine Steven Pifer, states that "the sense of Ukrainian nationalism is not as deep in the east as it is in the west". The shift to capitalism and a democratic system was hard and tumultuous, and numerous Ukrainians especially in the east yearned for the relative stability of the former ages. Adrian Karatnycky, a Ukrainian expert, claims that "After taking into account all of these variables. The biggest divide after all these factors is between those who view the Russian imperial and Soviet rule more sympathetically versus those who see them as a tragedy. Thousands of Ukrainians marched in support of closer ties to Europe during the 2004 Orange Revolution, exposing these rifts" (Conant, 2022). Since Ukraine's bloodless Orange Revolution of 2004 overturned Viktor Yanukovich's (former President of Ukraine) rigged election as president, tensions between Moscow and Kyiv have severed ties. Nevertheless, Yanukovich won the election in 2010, but he was deposed in February 2014 after bowing to Kremlin pressure and abandoning a trade agreement with the EU.

In early 2014, when Russia took over the Ukrainian part of Crimea, armed warfare erupted in 'Left Bank' (Eastern) Ukraine. As a consequence, protests started and the security forces violently suppressed demonstrations in Kyiv. Eastern Ukrainians raised objections to President Viktor Yanukovich's decision of concluding

an agreement with the European Union for substantial economic cooperation and integration. Resultantly, when the social unrest grew and the violence intensified, president Yanukovich left the nation in February 2014. Therewith, one month later in March 2014, the Russian military seized control over the Ukrainian region of Crimea. Russian President Vladimir Putin underlined the requirement to secure the rights of Russian nationals, and speakers in Crimea and southeast Ukraine. Moreover, in a contentious local referendum when Crimeans cast their ballots in favour of joining the Russian Federation, Russia legally captured the peninsula. The pro-Russian separatists held their independence referendums two months after the crisis widened ethnic divisions in Luhansk and Donetsk (Eastern Ukrainian parts). The armed combat between the Ukrainian military forces and the forces backed by Russia rapidly erupted in the nearby local areas. Besides, Russia's denial of any military engagement, both Ukraine and NATO noticed a build-up of Russian military forces near Donetsk and Russian cross-border firing after the annexation of Crimea (Krasnolutska, 2022).

The armed conflict between both sides evolved into an active stalemate, with recurrent clashes and shelling happening along the front lines separating Ukraine and the areas of the east held by Russia. Countries like Germany, and France, endeavoured to a ceasefire and sought to end the outrage via Minsk agreements signed in February 2015. The deal contained the measures like a ceasefire, the disposal of large weaponry, releasing war prisoners, the grant of self-government to Donbas, and restoring the state border to the Ukrainian government. However, the diplomatic attempts remained ineffective. Thereby, to confront Russian assaults elsewhere on the continent, explicitly in the Baltic States, NATO in April 2016 announced to deploy four battalions to Eastern Europe, rotating through Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and Estonia.

Moreover, to strengthen NATO's presence in the region, the US in September 2017 also delivered two US Army tank brigades to Poland. In addition, in January 2018, new sanctions were imposed by the US against several Russian officials, and nine Russian companies amid the Russian-Ukrainian war. However, the first supply of lethal weapons occurred (since the conflict started) when the US State Department in March 2018, authorized the shipment of anti-tank

weapons to Ukraine. In October 2018, when a series of massive air exercises in western Ukraine erupted, Ukraine participated alongside the US and seven other NATO nations. In reaction, the exercises were followed by Russia's yearly military drills in September 2018, known to be the biggest since the Soviet Union's collapse. Furthermore, on February 24, 2022, Russian forces invaded an entirely unprepared Ukraine after Russian President Vladimir Putin approved a "special military operation" against the nation. Putin asserted that the operation's purpose was to demilitarise, de-Nazify, and put an end to the supposed slaughter of Russians in Ukrainian territory (Gavin, 2022).

### **What Ignited War?**

Referring to the Ukrainian crisis, it is widely believed in the west that Russian President Vladimir Putin has responsibility for the crisis in Ukraine and certainly for the ongoing war in the region. It is considered that Putin has imperialistic ambitions concerning Ukraine i.e. to conquer Ukraine and other states to create a greater Russia that holds some resemblance to the former USSR. Thereby, Ukraine is his first target, and it makes sense for Sweden and Finland to become part of NATO to increase their forces level in Eastern Europe to contain Russia's imperialistic policies. Putin view the Ukraine as an "artificial state" and not a real state and considers both Ukrainian and Russians as "one people" possessing a common history. Moreover, one of the noticeable reasons for the crisis is that Putin considers the Soviet collapse as the greatest geo-political debacle of the century. In addition, he also declared in his speech that modern-day Ukraine was wholly created by Russia. More precisely, Putin's bent was on incorporating Ukraine into Russia (Mearsheimer, 2022).

*Figure 1: Map Highlighting the Russian invasion of Ukraine*



*Source: Retrieved from <https://www.voanews.com>*

Although Putin declared Ukraine as an independent state in his important speech presented on July 12, 2021, but also gave the reason for the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24<sup>th</sup>, 2022, that it is not our plan to invade Ukraine and occupy their land. Russia feels unsafe while facing threat from the present day Ukraine as it has become a springboard for the west and its allies to offense against Russia.

However, the US efforts to make Ukraine part of a Western-led bulwark over Russian borders indicate the real cause of the conflict. This strategy has three projection parts; firstly, to integrate Ukrainian territory into the EU, secondly, to convert Ukraine into a western-oriented liberal democracy, and to make Ukraine a part of the NATO alliance. This strategy came into motion at NATO's annual summit in April 2008 in Bucharest, Romania when NATO officially announced that Georgia and Ukraine will become part of the alliance. Thus, the Russian leaders immediately responded offensively to make it clear that this will threaten Russia's national security existentially and will not let either country join NATO. Moreover, the Russian President



also warned Ukraine by saying that if they intended to join the alliance, the consequences will be irrevocable i.e. Russia will do so with Crimea and the other eastern regions that will simply fall apart. Consequently, these efforts sparked the Ukrainian crisis in 2014 and Russia seized the Crimean region from Ukraine and help fuel the civil war between the Ukrainian government in the Donbas region and the pro-Russian separatists (Falahi, 2022).

The NATO's continuous efforts to make Ukraine its member, the military alliance have already been involved in providing training to the Ukrainian military forces and more than 10,000 Ukrainian soldiers have been trained. Furthermore, Trump during his administration decided to provide Kyiv with defensive armaments, and consequently, other NATO countries also became active, providing Ukraine with even more weapons. Ukraine military forces also began to participate with the NATO forces in joint military exercises. To sum up NATO's strategy it would correctly be said that "it was NATO's efforts to train and arm Ukraine" a new rebuild was seen between Washington and Kyiv for pursuing goals together. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy who had never shown much zeal for making Ukraine a part of NATO now embraced NATO's expansionism and also adopted a stringent approach towards Moscow by implementing new moves such as; shutting down of pro-Russian television stations and charging Putin's friend with treason (Arbab & Rahim, 2022).

Hence, from the analytical perspective, it has been argued that in the eight years since the 2014 Ukrainian crisis broke and the invasion took place earlier this year in February 2022 the US and its allies have paid less attention to bringing Ukraine into NATO. Resultantly, the issue had been taken off the table and thus NATO's expandability may not be an important cause of the war escalation.

### **Reasons behind Russia's Annexation of Ukraine**

There are several reasons behind the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. The apple of discord between Russia and Ukraine is mainly Crimea and Donbas. Nikita Khrushchev former Soviet leader conceded Crimea to Ukraine in 1954 for the purpose to develop cordial relations between the Russian and Ukrainian people. However, Russian nationalists in Crimea and Russia exhibit to again make the peninsula part of Russia,

since the collapse of the Union. Putin stated on December 4, 2014, in his annual address to the Federal Assembly, that Crimea is of extraordinary importance to the Russian Federation and that this peninsula holds a particular place in the hearts of the Russian people. For the people of Russia, Crimea is the holy ground. Crimea is important to Russians, just as other areas are to Muslims and Christians. As reported by the census of 2001, approximately 8 million Russians were residing in Ukraine, mostly in the East and South. In 2014 Moscow's actions in the Donbas and Crimea were justified by the assertion that the defense of these regions was their responsibility (Khan et al, 2019).

As to many Russian leaders, the altercation with Ukraine was a historical mistake that also pose a potential threat to the superpower status of Russia after the breakup of the Soviet Union. And losing grip over Ukraine will blemish Russia's image abroad. Furthermore, in the last several years, the relationship between Russia and Ukraine as trading partners had worsened and over time China surpassed Russia in establishing cordial trade relations with Ukraine. Before, the invasion of Crimea, Russia sought to merge Ukraine into the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), which now consists of countries comprising Belarus, Russia, Armenia, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan. In addition, the strong familial ties between Ukraine and Russia are persisting since ancient times, Kyiv; the capital of Ukraine is known as "the mother of Russian cities" which also contributes to one of the reasons for the Russian annexation of Ukraine (Minic, 2022).

## **Western Response**

The US and NATO have taken a clear stance in supporting Ukraine's territorial integrity and Sovereignty within its internationally recognized borders ever since Russia's illegitimate annexation of Crimea and destabilization of eastern Ukraine in 2014. The occupation of Crimea will never be recognized by the Allies and is strictly declared reprehensible. The Alliance has also denounced Russia's decision to recognize the self-declared "Donetsk People's Republic" and "Luhansk People's Republic" in eastern Ukraine, which was made in February 2022. NATO has blatantly stated that this violation of international law further jeopardizes Ukraine's

sovereignty and territorial integrity and has also condemned the so-called "referenda" on joining the Russian Federation in the Ukrainian territories that are in part under Russian military control. According to NATO, these fraudulent referendums are an egregious breach of the UN (United Nations) Charter and have no legal standing and they will not accept annexation that is unlawful and illegitimate (Zeager, 2022). Moreover, Sanctions have already been put in place by the US, EU, as well as other countries like the UK, Japan, and Australia in response to Russia's recognition of the two separatist areas of Ukraine. The actions targeted Russian institutions and individuals and moved Russia closer to being excluded from international financial markets. President Biden announced additional actions in response to the attacks. These included the application of export controls and sanctions against four of Russia's main state banks to cut off almost half of Russia's high-tech imports. Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine is condemned by the western world EU has intended to impair Russia's ability to finance the war against Ukraine by imposing sanctions and destroying Russia's economic foundations. South Korea has now also asserted to support the sanctions system (Mankoff, 2022).

Besides, EU leaders urged Russia to immediately halt all military operations, and completely respect Ukraine's territorial integrity, and sovereignty, on many occasions. European Council stated "The use of force and coercion to change borders has no place in the 21st century. Tensions and conflict should be resolved exclusively through dialogue and diplomacy." On another occasion, the EU Chief Ursula von der Leyen during his trip to Kyiv expressed "Ukraine belongs to our European family" (European Commission-Statement, 8<sup>th</sup> April 2022). The EU has supported Ukraine in terms of military, financial, political, and humanitarian assistance and has committed to supporting those fleeing the conflict in Ukraine as well as the nations taking them in. The UN, OSCE (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe), NATO, and the G7 (Group of Seven), are also coordinating with partners and allies to end the crisis (Ericson, 2022).

## **Recap of the War Outcomes**

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has far-reaching consequences in

various areas; i.e. the entire scenario has evolved into a humanitarian crisis, erupted food and energy crisis, and national security issues, and raises questions concerning the architecture of international security. Although these challenges and consequences are not limited as the entire world will be affected on a larger scale. The war led to the continuing humanitarian crisis that has impacted the well-being of lives of millions. It is not just the crisis of the war but the human cost of the armed warfare that might or surely will impact the coming generations of Ukraine. As per the United Nations Organizations report concerning the Ukrainian people's devastation in the war escalation, approximately 11 million people have left their hometowns in Ukraine and among which 5.3 million people have fled to neighbouring countries for their safety. Adding to that, 6.5 million people are displaced in the country amidst the catastrophic invasion of Russia. Moreover, according to the UNO's Children Agency, two-thirds of all Ukrainian children have been impacted due to the war so far and had to flee their homes (Buchkovska, 2022).

The sanctions system has worsened the key transport routes between Ukraine and Russia and consequently between other parts of the world. This has disrupted trade and commerce more broadly. However, Russia's linkages to the European ports have been disconnected and commodity exports to other destinations have also been halted. The new report of the World Bank concerning "The impact of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on investment and Global Trade" mentions that global trade will drop by 1% and lowering global Gross Domestic Product (GDP) by just less than 1%. In addition, the war escalation is affecting the auto-makers in Europe along with impacting the consumer's fuel and food internationally (Buchkovska, 2022). It is noticeable that people around the world in general and across Europe, in particular, are finding it hard to meet the necessities, and no state, no region, or even industry is left untouched by these derangements caused by war.

Ukraine has faced huge devastation as a result of the war. Besides, sanctions on Russia and an economic hit on the Russian Federation, Ukraine is also left with an economic crisis mainly including a shortage of food and energy challenges that have consequently slowed down the economic growth in the country. Ukraine is the country that grows enough food to feed around four hundred million

people across the globe including fifty percent of the world's sunflower oil supply, ten percent of the world's grain supply, and thirteen percent of the worldwide corn supply (Ruta, 2022). But due to the catastrophic invasion of Russia, Ukraine has become unable to plant crop areas i.e. thirty percent of the fertilized land has been affected. This implies that due to un-harvested areas Ukraine's supply chains have also ruptured as of the closure of the black sea ports and limited ability to move the commodities via western borders. All such scenario has led to a slowdown in the economic growth rates and led to high inflation.

### **Potential Solutions**

As the crisis between both sides has been said to worsen the role of regional actors can support in terms of how to get to negotiations and sort out the armed conflict. Although, seemingly "ceasefire" is the best possible solution to end hostilities it is not as easy as considered to be. The acceptable solutions to the conflict remain far apart due to two main reasons. Firstly, Ukraine's tendency to become a NATO ally that is not acceptable to Russia at any cost, and secondly, Russia's annexation of Crimea claims the region as their part of the land. However, amid this Pully-haul situation, the conflict seems unlikely to be resolved. Referring to the role of regional players, this conflict provides avenues for US support to push back the Russian forces and enable negotiations between Russia and Ukraine (Taylor, 2022). The US support should be characterized in terms of military, political, and financial assistance to secure the independent status of the Ukrainian territory. The NATO alliance and the US must continue to strengthen and lead the broad union of democracies to provide sufficient military assistance to Ukraine and impose sanctions against Russian Federation.

The leaders of these countries and international organizations need to emphasize the principles of the UN charter to maintain a rule-based order and enable peace i.e. crucial for the well-being of the international system. This also includes the protection of the Ukrainian's right to self-determination. The division of the Ukrainian territory with their considerable demilitarize regions likewise; the case of the two Koreas, Turkey or of Cyprus is also a feasible solution

to shut off the conflict. The Donbas region could be created as an “Eastern Ukraine” that has more commonalities with Russian than the Ukrainian state (D’Anieri & Kuzio, 2020). Thereupon, the creation of the new zone would serve as a buffer state between pro-European Ukraine and the Russian Federation.

Encouraging direct peace talks between Kyiv and Moscow may lead to a peaceful end to the conflict. Although peace talks have begun between both states with the essential role of Turkey, however, the hostile situation needs more to achieve diplomatic success. The setting of terms and conditions such as, it would be the optimal condition for Kyiv to have access to the European Union’s internal market without necessarily joining the union as a full member. The neutral condition between the EU, NATO, and Ukraine towards Russia may become an ideal potential solution that can be considered and may at least be partly achieved by both parties (Michael, 2022).

## **Conclusion**

Russia and Ukraine have been involved in antagonism since the collapse of the USSR. The friction between their relations first led to a full fledged crisis in 2014 and now a war in 2022. The primary causes behind the hostility are Russia’s aspiration to make the Crimean region part of the Russian Federation, to make the Donbas region independent, and to recover its image as a superpower figure in the global arena. Moreover, the crisis has also led to serious repercussions for Ukraine, the European region, and as well as for the entire Globe. Ukraine is torn by both humanitarian and economic crises while Europe, in general, is also facing an economic topsy-turvy as it depends on approximately 40% of the energy supply from Russia which is indeed disrupted now up to a greater extent. If the ongoing issue between Russia and Ukraine is not resolved on time, we might see these crises as contributing factors to the downfall of Europe.

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